

Not An Extraordinary Life

by Antonio Cardenas

I guess I can preface this with the statement that life is extraordinary in itself. My life is fairly common in my view, especially among children of immigrants from other countries, and specifically from my Fathers' homeland of Mexico. My Father came here to the United States of America as a young 19 year old migrant worker to better his life. He worked in the rich agricultural fields of California's San Joaquin Valley and on the railroads of northern and central California. He met my mother in California, who was born in Fresno, CA and is also of Mexican descent. This is a common story of Mexican immigrants and their children. Here is where my story starts.

I was born in Woodland, California on January 28th, 1952. My father was working on the railroad during this time. Shortly after I was born, we moved to central California's San Joaquin Valley where he procured work on a ranch/farm (Linneman Ranches, Inc.) in Firebaugh, CA. He was 22 years old.

When I was two years old my brother Robert was born. The nearest hospital was 15 miles away in Dos Palos, CA (Population then, approximately 1500). Shortly after my brothers birth we moved to Sanalona, Sinaloa, Mexico where my grandparents lived. My Dad came here to await the proper paperwork from the Mexican and US government for him to immigrate properly to the US. My mother was a US citizen. Mr. Mike Linneman, the owner of Linneman Ranches, helped sponsor my Father and eventually we moved back to the ranch and my father began his career as a farmer. He was 25 or 26 by this time and he worked at Linneman's until he was 70 years old, when he retired.

I vaguely remember my time in Mexico, but here is where I, a 2 year old learned to speak. The language of course was Spanish. My mother spoke perfect English so in these formative years I became bilingual. Upon our return to Linneman Ranches, I remember being enrolled in pre-school, and taking a school bus to a church a few miles away where our classes were held. Of course at that point I had to polish up my English to communicate and play with all the kids.

My next three siblings were girls who were all born in Dos Palos. Cecilia, Gloria, and Alicia. The five of us growing up in the 1950's on a ranch in California was pretty cool. Plenty of open space to play with the other kids on the ranch, and plenty of farm implements to climb on, ditches to swim in, trees to climb, forts to build, 15 mile bicycle rides, etc.

I started elementary school at Oro Loma Elementary (Oro Loma means Gold Hills in Spanish), which was a small school centered among the agricultural farms of our area. Oro Loma Elementary taught Kindergarten through Eighth grade and is where most of the kids from this vast farming community attended school.

Another thing about growing up on the ranch is WORK. My 1st job at the ranch was helping my uncles move the irrigation system sprinkler pipes in the cotton fields. I helped by grabbing the end of a 30' long by 6" diameter sprinkler pipe and placing it at the opening of the previous pipe moved. My uncle who couldn't see the opening because of the tall cotton, would thrust the pipe into the opening until it was engaged. There was also a constant flow of water coming down the pipes. He would move on to go

retrieve the next pipe while I walked to the end of the pipe that we just placed, where I would move cotton stalks away from the sprinkler heads, straighten the pipe and wait for my uncle to bring the next pipe over. This was repeated for about 40 to 70 pipes per line ($\frac{1}{4}$ to almost $\frac{1}{2}$ mile) and about 7 lines per field. (It was wet, muddy and cold, and we started at 5:30 AM. I was 8 years old.

Later when I turned 12 years old, I was able to attain my Social Security card and start working in the fields during the summer. At twelve years old you were only allowed to work 9 hours a day, 6 days a week. At 14 years old you could then work 11 hours a day 7 days a week. You could also operate heavy machinery, such as tractors, bulldozers, work trucks, and other farm implements. (Those were the days).

Next was schooling. I liked school and got descent grades. I worked during the school year also, of course after school. In my junior year I had joined the varsity football team. One day early in the season my father came to me and said that one of the workers had quit, and he needed someone to drive one of the sub-soilers (Large D-8 Caterpillar with a subsoil plow). So I quit the football team and after school at around 3 PM I would go to the ranch and start work. I would quit at 11PM, come home and do my homework then to bed around 1 AM. Education and hard work were the two main attributes that my father tried to instill in us kids, so the sports thing wasn't as important to the work that needed to be done at the ranch.

I graduated from high school in 1970 with decent grades, A's and B's mostly. I think I had one C in English. I went to college at UC Santa Barbara for two years and decided it wasn't for me. Came back to the ranch for a few months and then decided to join the United States Air Force. I decided I wanted to be a fighter pilot. When I sat down with the recruiter, he said that I could be a pilot, but that I would need a college degree to start the process. This could be done while I was in the USAF under certain programs that I could enroll in.

I joined the USAF in May of 1972 with this plan, but it never came to fruition. I selected an AFSC 304X0, which is a job code for Microwave Communications Specialist, and went on to boot camp at Lackland AFB in San Antonio, TX. Then off to Keesler AFB, MS for my technical training in basic electronics and microwave communications systems.

My first permanent duty station was McChord AFB in Tacoma, WA. I was assigned to an Electronic Installation squadron. Its purpose was to travel to Air Force bases and install or upgrade the electronic equipment for a variety of systems. My first assignment was with a 40 man crew to install all of the equipment necessary to get a decommissioned Strategic Air Command base and runway up and operational. It was about a 45 day project. I was stationed there for 2 years until 19. I married there, and had a son, Tony Cardenas, Jr.

My next permanent duty was to Iraklion AFS, Crete, Greece. Here I was assigned to the communications squadron. Their responsibility was to maintain communications for the base from the Island of Crete to the mainland base in Athens, Greece. It was part of the USAF and US military communications system in Europe. I was stationed there for two years. My second son Joseph Cardenas was born in Greece at a hospital in the city of Iraklion.

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I had four more permanent assignments while in the USAF,

Shaw AFB, Sumter, SC

Eglin AFB, Ft. Walton Beach, FL

Osan Air Base, Osan, Korea

Altus AFB, Altus, OK

The first three were tactical assignments. The communications equipment was all mobile, and we would deploy to different areas in the US and overseas to set up the equipment to support tactical “games” or maneuvers for the USAF and other military operations.

The fourth one in Altus AFB was working on the air-to-ground communications systems for the aircraft control tower and other systems related to the flight line communications, etc.

I left the USAF in 1981